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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 LONDON 001708

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SUBJECT: HMG ACCELERATES MEASURES TO COMBAT H1N1 VIRUS;  
EMBASSY LONDON PREPARES

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. HMG is preparing for the worst case scenario that one third of the UK population could become infected by the H1N1 virus, with potential deaths ranging from 19,000 to 65,000. HMG's National Pandemic Flu Service website became operational on July 23 and within minutes of its launch, received 9.3 million hits per hour, overloading the system. HMG has identified 31 deaths (as of July 22) attributable to the H1N1 virus and estimates that 100,000 people were infected with the virus during the week of July 19. Despite predictions from HMG that 65,000 people in the UK could die from the H1N1 virus, to date there have been fewer deaths than during an ordinary bad flu season. The UK already has 132 million doses of vaccine on order for autumn, sufficient for every UK citizen. The H1N1 virus threatens to put the UK under further economic strain, with some predictions that the pandemic could reduce the UK's GDP by 5 percent or more. Post is encouraging staff to use the National Pandemic Flu Service should they become ill and is preparing management and outreach strategies should the pandemic become more severe. End summary.

HMG Coordination and Demographic "Hotspots"

¶2. (SBU) HMG expects that one third of the UK population will become infected with the H1N1 virus and is closely coordinating efforts between the National Healthcare Service (NHS), UK Department of Health, UK Health and Protection Agency, and other agencies. HMG's emergency team "COBRA," which is named after the "Cabinet Office Briefing Room A" where it normally meets, convened high-level inter-ministerial meetings within days of the H1N1 virus emerging in late April 2009. Cabinet Office staff Amanda Crouch told ESTHOff another inter-ministerial group -- at a lower level -- meets on a weekly basis to coordinate HMG efforts. This includes weekly conference calls with the Scottish and Northern Ireland governments to ensure all parties are kept informed of developments. There is also a small task force of staff, she said, seconded from other agencies to coordinate HMG's efforts to address the pandemic.

¶3. (SBU) London, the West Midlands, and Scotland continue to be the "hotspots" for the virus, although Scottish health authorities are reporting that numbers are starting to drop off. UK Department of Health Official Jo Newstead told ESTHOff there is no specific cause for the higher rates of H1N1 virus in these areas other than the fact they are in high-density population centers. Rates of the virus in Northern Ireland continue to remain low, with only fifty

confirmed cases as of July 10. Epidemiologists report children (5-17 years of age) are being hit hardest by the H1N1 virus, while the impact on the elderly is relatively low.

#### HMG Changes Approach

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14. (SBU) UK Health Secretary Andy Burnham announced to Parliament on July 2 HMG's transition from a "containment" to "treatment" strategy to tackle the H1N1 virus pandemic. This means the virus will be diagnosed based on symptoms, rather than laboratory testing. The same day, Department of Health officials shared with the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee its outline and plans for the National Pandemic Flu Service, announced publicly just a few weeks later. HMG officials received considerable criticism from MPs on July 2 for not having the National Pandemic Flu Service up and running yet.

#### National Pandemic Flu Service

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15. (SBU) The National Pandemic Flu Service became operational July 23, and received an unprecedented 2,600 hits per second (or 9.3 million hits per hour) within minutes of its launch, which reportedly caused the website to crash. HMG announced on July 24 it is increasing the capacity for the website. The National Pandemic Flu Service, initially announced by HMG on July 16, includes a dedicated website and hotline for patients to call, receive a diagnosis, and obtain an authorization number/voucher for a caregiver to take to a pharmacy to obtain antiviral (i.e. tamiflu or relenza) medication. Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales will not participate in the service at this time.

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16. (SBU) HMG reports it launched the service to give patients access to antiviral medication as quickly as possible and to free up General Practitioners (GPs) to deal with other priorities. In addition, part of HMG's strategy is to keep infected people away from the general population while they are contagious. The call center employs approximately 1,500 staff (not medically trained) that will check symptoms against a series of questions to diagnose whether antiviral medication is needed. Conservatives and Liberal Democrats are already criticizing HMG's ability to cope with the pandemic given initial implementation problems with the flu service.

#### Impact on Travel

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17. (SBU) Cabinet Office staff member Simon Strickland told ESTHoff HMG has no "current" plans to use any type of thermal imaging or other screening at airports or ports of entry. However, media reports indicate that British Airways and Virgin Atlantic airlines are banning travelers exhibiting symptoms of the H1N1 virus. Information received from the International Air Transport Association (IATA) regarding these reports indicate the situation is being exaggerated by the media. British Airways officials are telling IATA they don't do any active screening and are only following standard operating procedures for dealing with ill passengers.

#### Impact on the UK's Economy

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18. (SBU) The increasing spread of the H1N1 virus threatens to impact businesses and the economy. Oxford Economics, a forecasting company, predicts the pandemic could result in a five percent decrease in the UK's GDP based on the experience of previous pandemics. Results in this same study indicate GDP growth could turn around within 3-4 years, but that the H1N1 virus could tip the UK and world economy into deflation

in the near-term. Another study from Ernst and Young indicates the UK's economy could contract even more -- by 7.5 percent in 2009. (Comment: This instant analysis should not be taken too seriously. There are lots of other factors that play in determining future UK growth rates).

¶9. (SBU) A meeting between HMG emergency service personnel and businesses revealed that more than a third of the UK's businesses have no response plans at all for dealing with the pandemic. Some predict close to 12 percent of the workforce is expected to be forced to stay home due to the H1N1 virus, especially if the flu season gears up in autumn. In areas such as London and the West Midlands, UK doctors say the virus has reached epidemic levels and may strain transport and other vital services. As a result, health officials are considering plans to allow people suspected to have contacted the H1N1 virus to take up to two weeks off work without a note from their GP.

Embassy Working Group

¶10. (SBU) Embassy London convened a Working Group on the H1N1 virus on July 22 to review tripwires and planning contingencies. A smaller group had met in late April when the virus initially broke out and distributed information to employees. Both USG and locally employed staff will be directed to use the UK's National Healthcare Service (NHS) and the National Pandemic Flu Service if they suspect they have the H1N1 virus. Post is also developing a communication strategy that will use a broad range of media, including the embassy's intranet/internet, Twitter, instant messaging, and social media tools such as Facebook. Post is reviewing non-essential functions so that staff performing those functions can fill essential functions if significant numbers of staff fall ill. The consular section has made contingency plans in the event staff levels fall below the minimum number to maintain normal operations. Embassy has sufficient supplies to treat each employee (USG staff and their families and locally-employed staff) with one course of anti-viral medication should the UK healthcare system become overburdened and/or death rates increase.

Comment

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¶11. (SBU) PM Brown and HMG received a "B " in the July 23 edition in a national British newspaper regarding its efforts to manage the H1N1 virus pandemic and for averting a national panic. While the UK's healthcare system is far from perfect, the HMG's strong coordination and the National Pandemic Flu Service are all positive signs the UK is prepared. The next couple of weeks will indicate how well the new service is implemented and provide insight on whether HMG's strategies are working.

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